

Message Text

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ACTION NEA-07

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USMISSION USUN NEW YORK PRIORITY

S E C R E T DAMASCUS 1303

LIMDIS

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: PFOR SY UN EG JO XF

SUBJ: SYRIAN STRATEGY AS UNDOF RENEWAL APPROACHES

1. THERE IS NO CLEAR READING IN DAMASCUS AT THIS POINT AS TO HOW SYRIANS WILL TREAT UNDOF RENEWAL NEXT MAY. PRESIDENT ASAD IS ONCE AGAIN PLAYING HIS CARDS VERY CLOSE TO HIS CHEST. HIS MOST RECENT PUBLIC STATEMENT ON SUBJECT, IN MARCH 2 TV INTERVIEW, WAS THAT SYRIANS HAD SUBJECT UNDER CONSIDERATION AND THAT THERE WAS STILL PLENTY OF TIME TO DISCUSS IT.

2. WE FRANKLY DOUBT THAT ASAD AND HIS ADVISORS HAVE YET MADE A DECISION ON RENEWAL AND CONDITIONS THEY MIGHT SEEK ATTACHED THERETO. BASED ON PAST EXPERIENCE, WE BELIEVE THEY WILL NOT TAKE THEIR DECISION UNTIL SOME POINT IN MAY. THEY UNQUESTIONABLY BELIEVE THEY CAN ONLY GAIN BY USING UNDOF RENEWAL ISSUE TO KEEP WORLD ATTENTION

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AND CONCERN FOCUSED ON THE SYRIAN-ISRAELI CEASEFIRE LINE.

ALSO THEY HAVE BEEN FULLY ABSORBED BY PROBLEMS ASSOCIATED WITH THEIR OWN PEACEKEEPING OPERATION IN LEBANON.

3. NONETHELESS, SYRIANS BELOW THE LEADERSHIP LEVEL ARE OUTSPOKENLY CONCERNED ABOUT POSITION IN WHICH INCONCLUSIVE TERMINATION OF JANUARY SC DEBATE HAS LEFT THEM. ONE OF FIRST QUESTIONS ASKED BY FOREIGN MINISTRY OFFICIALS ADVISING SARG ON NEXT STEPS FOLLOWING UN VETO WAS "HOW ARE WE GOING TO BE ABLE TO RENEW?" THEIR TWO IMPLICIT ASSUMPTIONS IN THIS QUESTION WERE FIRST, THAT IT WILL BE IN SYRIA'S INTEREST TO RENEW MANDATE AND SECOND, THAT SYRIA WILL NEED SOMETHING MORE THAN THE DEADLINE ITSELF TO BE ABLE TO RENEW.

4. WE CONCEIVE OF THE FOLLOWING POSSIBLE SCENARIOS, EMPHASIZING THEY REPRESENT AT THIS STAGE NOTHING MORE THAN EMBASSY BRAINSTORMING:

A. AN UNCONDITIONAL RENEWAL:

SARG MAY DECIDE THAT UNDOF PRESENCE NECESSARY TO PROTECT SYRIA FROM PREEMPTIVE ISRAELI ATTACK DURING ELECTION YEAR WHEN, AS SYRIANS BELIEVE, US DIPLOMACY HAMSTRUNG BY PREOCCUPATION WITH DOMESTIC POLITICS AND SYRIA DEEPLY ENGAGED IN RESTABILIZING LEBANON. REASONING THAT US POLITICAL SITUATION MAY NOT PERMIT RESUMPTION OF ENERGETIC DIPLOMATIC EFFORTS AND MAY QUIETLY RENEW UNDOF FOR SIX MONTHS AS THEY DID IN MAY 1975. RATIONALE MIGHT BE THAT, WITH LITTLE PROGRESS EXPECTED DURING NEXT SIX MONTHS LEAST DAMAGING ALTERNATIVE IS TO DOWNPLAY UNDOF RENEWAL. (COMMENT: SYRIA MAY REALLY BELIEVE US WILL BE PARALYZED FOR WHOLE YEAR AHEAD BUT IT IS INCONCEIVABLE THEY WOULD LET US OFF THE UNDOF HOOK BY ACCEPTING ANYTHING MORE THAN A SIX MONTH RENEWAL.) THIS COURSE OF ACTION WOULD NOT EXCLUDE RENEWAL OF SYRO-PALESTINIAN INITIATIVE AT UN SUCH AS FURTHER SC DEBATE AND EVEN CALL FOR SPECIAL UNGA SESSION.

B. CONDITIONAL RENEWAL:

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WITH EXPERIENCE OF JANUARY SC DEBATE UNDER HIS BELT, ASAD MIGHT DECIDE TO REENLIST PALESTINIANS FOR ANOTHER GO AT UN DEBATE, THIS TIME MAKING IT CLEAR THAT BRITISH MANEUVERING WHICH CAUSED AN EXPECTED LAST MINUTE VOTING SLIPPAGE AT PREVIOUS SC SESSION WOULD NOT TOLERATED AGAIN. CONCEIVABLE NEED FOR THIS COURSE OF ACTION WOULD BE TO PREVENT PALESTINIANS, ALREADY SUSPICIOUS THAT THERE IS A HUSSEIN-ASAD "DEAL" AT THEIR EXPENSE, FROM

BEING ANY FURTHER CO-OPTED INTO EGYPTIAN ORBIT. IT COULD ALSO REFLECT A NEW RESPECT FOR PALESTINIAN CAPACITY TO MAKE TROUBLE FOR SYRIA IN LEBANON. SYRIAN PRESTIGE IS NOW SO FULLY COMMITTED TO ASSURING A "SUCCESS" IN LEBANON THAT IT IS IN OUR OPINION HIGHLY VULNERABLE TO PALESTINIAN PRESSURE AIMED AT ENSURING ASAD PRESERVES HIS HARD LINE ON SETTLEMENT PREREQUISITES, SARG PUBLICLY REITERATES ON EVERY OCCASION ITS DEMAND FOR TOTAL WITHDRAWAL FROM LANDS OCCUPIED IN 1967 AND ACCEPTANCE OF PALESTINIAN RIGHTS. IT DID SO MOST RECENTLY TO USYG GUYER (DAMASCUS 1248 NOTAL). ANOTHER SC OR EVEN SPECIAL GENERAL ASSEMBLY SESSION COULD BE PROMOTED AS LAYING GROUND WORK FOR EFFORT DURING COMING UNGA TO CREATE NEW "VICTORY" FOR ARAB CAUSE THROUGH EXPULSION OF ISRAEL FROM UNGA.

C. NONRENEWAL OF UNDOF/NONMILITARY OPTION:

ASAD MIGHT DECIDE THAT HIS OWN DOMESTIC PRESSURES CREATE NEED FOR FURTHER MOVEMENT TOWARD SETTLEMENT SO GREAT THAT ONLY SYRIAN ANNOUNCEMENT IT DID NOT INTEND RENEW UNDOF WOULD REIGNITE US NEGOTIATING EFFORTS IN AN ELECTION YEAR. ASAD'S CALCULATION COULD BE BASED UPON BELIEF THAT REMOVAL OF UNDOF SAFETY CUSHION, WITH ATTENDANT RISKS OF SYRIAN-ISRAELI CLASHES EITHER INTENTIONAL OR ACCIDENTAL LEADING TO GENERAL ARAB-ISRAELI WAR, WOULD PUT ENORMOUS PRESSURE UPON US TO REPLACE DISENGAGEMENT AGREEMENT WITH MORE FAR-REACHING SETTLEMENT, AS WELL AS CAUSE OTHER ARAB STATES TO SWING INTO LINE BEHIND SYRIANS. ASAD COULD EVEN USE THIS DEVICE, IF HE PLAYED HIS CARDS SHREWDLY, TO ATTEMPT UNDERCUT EGYPTIAN NON-RESORT-TO-FORCE PLEDGES EMBODIED IN SINAI AGREEMENT, THUS REMOVING SPECTER CONFRONTING SARG MILITARY PLANNERS OF ONE-FRONT WAR WITH ISRAEL.

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WHILE WE HAVE NO EVIDENCE OF THIS, IT MAY BE THAT ASAD MAY FEEL MORE CONFIDENT IN JUDGING ISRAELI MILITARY INTENTIONS AS RESULT OF HIS SUCCESSFUL ORCHESTRATION OF POLITICAL AND MILITARY ASSETS LEADING TO HIS LEBANESE "VICTORY."

D. NONRENEWAL OF UNDOF/LIMITED MILITARY FORCE OPTION:

ASAD MIGHT DECIDE TO GIVE SUBSTANCE TO DECISION TO PERMIT UNDOF TO LAPSE BY INITIATING LIMITED MILITARY ACTIONS IN UNDOF-REGULATED ZONE PRIOR TO OR FOLLOWING MAY DEADLINE. CONTINGENTS OF "POLICE" MIGHT BE SENT INTO ZONE, ARTICLLERY AND TANK POSITIONS COULD BE STRENGTHENED, AND AGGRESSIVE PATROLLING MIGHT BE INITIATED UP TO SEPARATION LINE, PERHAPS ACCOMPANIED BY CONTINUOUS SYRIAN PROTEST-

ATIONS THAT SYRIA WOULD NOT BE FIRST TO BREAK CEASEFIRE. THIS COURSE AGAIN WOULD PUT PRESSURE ON US, ISRAEL AND EGYPT TO REACT TO THREAT OF POSSIBLE OUTBREAK OF WAR AND WOULD UNDOUBTEDLY STRAIN US-ISRAELI AND USE-EGYPTIAN BILATERAL RELATIONS. SYRIAN WOULD CALCULATE THAT RISK OF WAR THROUGH MISJUDGMENT HIGH, BUT THAT POSSIBLE GAINS OFFSET RISKS. BOTH THIS SCENARIO AND OPTION "C" COULD BE IMPLEMENTED IN TANDEM WITH "EMERGENCY" UN GENERAL ASSEMBLY OR SECURITY COUNCIL SESSIONS PROVIDING SUITABLE (FROM SYRIAN POINT OF VIEW) VENUE TO NEGOTIATE FURTHER SETTLEMENT, OR RESCUE SYRIA FROM MILITARY DISASTER IF MISCALCULATION OCCURRED. INITIAL FAILURE OF THIS OPTION TO PRODUCE DIPLOMATIC BENEFITS COULD TEMPT SYRIA INTO EMBARKING UPON WAR OF ATTRITION.

E. NONRENEWAL OF UNDOF/UNLIMITED MILITARY FORCE OPTION:

WE DO NOT BELIEVE THAT SYRIANS WOULD CONSIDER SERIOUSLY THIS OPTION. THEY APPRECIATE FULLY ITS SUICIDAL POSSIBILITIES.

F. BRINKSMANSHIP OPTION:

AS POSSIBLE VARIANT OF OPTION "C," ASAD MIGHT CONTINUE DELPHIC STANCE BEYOND END OF MAY AND DELAY RENEWAL OF UNDOF ON DAY-BY-DAY BASIS WITHOUT REQUESTING
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DEPARTURE OF UNDOF FORCES. PURPOSE MIGHT BE DESIRE TO MAXIMIZE ATTENTION OF INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY ON RENEWED POTENTIAL FOR REGIONAL INSTABILITY, AND TO DEMONSTRATE TO ASAD'S DOMESTIC HARDLINE CRITICS RISKS OF IMPATIENCE IN SEARCH FOR SETTLEMENT, WITHOUT ACTUALLY REFUSING TO RENEW UNDOF.

5. IN CONCLUSION, AS ADDRESSEES RECALL, PAST THREE SYRIAN UNDOF RENEWALS HAVE NOT FOLLOWED IDENTICAL PATTERN AND WE SUSPECT THAT EVEN SHOULD ASAD DECIDE TO RETURN TO HIS UN OPTION IN MAY, HIS METHOD WILL LIKELY EXHIBIT SOME ORIGINALITY AS HAS BEEN CASE IN THE PAST. WE DERIVE SOME COMFORT FROM ASAD'S RELUCTANCE TO COMMIT HIMSELF PUBLICLY TO ANY UNDOF OPTION DURING INTERVIEW WITH ITALIAN TELEVISION RELEASED MARCH 2, AND INTERPRET THIS AS SIGN THAT ASAD INTENDS PRESERVE HIS FLEXIBILITY UNTIL HE RECEIVES CLEAR SIGNAL OF US DIPLOMATIC INTENTIONS. ALSO WEIGHING HEAVILY ON HIS DECISION WILL BE STATUS OF LEBANESE SITUATION, TO WHICH ASAD HAS COMMITTED SIGNIFICANT SYRIAN RESOURCES, PRESTIGE, AND TOP-LEVEL SARG PERSONNEL. PEACE ON THE GOLAN WOULD PROBABLY BE ESSENTIAL ADJUNCT TO CONTINUED SUCCESSFUL

SYRIAN DIPLOMATIC ENGAGEMENT IN LEBANON,
THUS MAKING RESORT TO OPTIONS WHICH INCLUDE
RISK OF SYRO-ISRAELI MILITARY CLASHES LESS ATTRACTIVE.
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